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THE UNITED STATES AND THE WAR: A BRITISH VIEW

BY SYDNEY BROOKS

AMONG the curious incidents of the war the November elections in the United States occupy for the onlooker a place of extraordinary interest and significance. They were held three months to a day after the outbreak of by far the most terrible and probably one of the most decisive struggles in the history of the world. The American people had from the first felt in their own persons and fortunes, as individuals and as a nation, the repercussion of this devastating cataclysm. Their exchanges had had to be closed; they were unable to remit their obligations to Europe; a vast commerce of some \$2,000,000,000 a year was suddenly either demolished or dislocated; the falling-off in fiscal revenue was such that the Government was driven to impose a number of direct taxes; unemployment and trade depression supervened on a scale that threatened to make the position and prospects of the railroads, long dubious, exceedingly critical; right and left unprecedented measures were being taken to ward off a complete financial and commercial collapse; the Southern States were prostrated by the cessation of the cotton industry; emergency currency had to be issued; the authorities at Washington found themselves confronted with new and anxious problems concerning the rights and duties and liabilities of neutrals; and throughout the United States the apprehension gathered strength that the extension of the war into the Pacific, and particularly the entrance of Japan into the lists, and the possibility of a German victory, might reach to the prejudice of America's material, political, and strategic interests.

Besides this the emotions of the American people had been deeply stirred by the catastrophe in which Europe had permitted itself to be engulfed. Apart altogether from any question of immediate or ultimate self-interest, the sheer horror and wicked-

ness of the spectacle had moved them equally to revulsion and pity. Perhaps in no country were the rights and wrongs of the war more passionately debated. So many millions of American citizens claimed kinship with the belligerents on one side or the other that the conflict had for them something of the character of a civil war by proxy. Moreover, as by far the greatest of the neutral Powers, and the only one that could be said to represent the informed judgment of the outer world, the United States found herself appealed to for sympathy and moral support by each and all of the combatants. There was almost a scramble, from which, I am glad to think, Great Britain, wisely preferring that the facts should speak for themselves, stood aloof, to win American approval and good-will. The Germans were particularly, but not always intelligently, solicitous of American opinion. The Belgians despatched a special mission to lay before the President and people of the United States the tale of their wrongs and sufferings. Not without reason Americans conceived themselves as occupying for the time being a sort of provisional judgment-seat from which it was expected that they should dispense their verdicts of guilt or acquittal. Behind this competition to gain the ear of the United States there was probably a twofold impulse—first, that decent respect for contemporary opinion which is making it more and more impossible for any nation to go to war without at least an attempt to show that its cause is just; and, secondly, a consciousness that, while American neutrality was accepted on all hands as a static factor, American resources and benevolence and diplomacy might have no small influence on the course of the war and the terms of peace.

Through many channels and in many forms the struggle in Europe was thus brought imminently home to the minds and hearts and interests of the American people. It threw all merely domestic questions into the background. For the first time a foreign event, and its material consequences, and its variegated and absorbing aspects dominated not merely American thought, but American life and welfare. One gathered the impression of a deepening realization that the modern world is, after all, interdependent, and that the United States, however much it might proclaim its isolation and cultivate a studied indifference to European happenings, could not escape, politically, financially, commercially, or in any other way, from the conditions of its environment. With a start almost of surprise and consternation multitudes of Americans began making the

discovery that their country was not a whole, but merely a part of a whole. Some in the first flush of this revelation took to speculating on the probable effects of a German or an Allied victory on American interests. Others descried in the conflict the predominance or the overthrow of the ethical conceptions, social ideals, and political principles that are the groundwork of American civilization. Others, again, foresaw, as the results of a struggle that would assuredly entail the exhaustion of all the belligerents a vast increase of American commerce and influence—New York ousting London from its old and supreme position as the financial center of the universe and the clearing-house of all trade, and American merchants seizing the major share of the business which their rivals would be forced to let slip. But what seemed, above all things, to engage and stimulate and flatter the American imagination was the hope and belief that this war would ultimately be ended through the good offices of the United States, and that the future not only of the Old World, but of mankind itself, might largely depend on the vision which the American mediators brought to their task. I should be sorry to say how many forecasts and exhortations along these lines I was privileged during September and October to read in the American papers and reviews. The notion appeared to have taken a remarkably firm hold over the country that American statesmanship would sooner or later be face to face with an unexampled opportunity, not only for composing the differences between the warring nations, but for ushering in a veritable reign of peace and releasing the world from the detonating terrors and searing burdens, the mad welter of hates and rivalries, that hitherto have been its lot. Before the exalted and prophetic sensibilities of an incredibly large number of the American people there seemed to rise up the possibility of such a service to humanity as no Power had had even the chance of rendering since the collapse of the Roman Empire.

It was in these circumstances, and among all these manifold agitations, and with a universal consciousness that the immediate future would be full possibly of peril, certainly of anxiety, for the United States, that the American people turned their attention to the business of passing a verdict on the first two years of President Wilson's Administration and of electing the whole of a new House of Representatives and a third of a new Senate. I remember Lord Rosebery once exclaiming, when the European sky was dark with clouds, that he would support any British Government which showed strength and capacity. It was some-

what in that spirit that one expected the American electorate to cast their votes. From all the available evidence it appeared beyond doubt that the question uppermost in their minds was war and their country's relation to it. They were adjured from many quarters whence they are accustomed to look for light and leading to lay partisanship aside, to rise to the level of the bigger issues, and to do nothing that would weaken the President's hands. The October number of this REVIEW contained a powerful editorial appeal to all voters to rally round their Chief Executive. "Now more than ever before or perhaps ever again," it said, "it behooves our country to stand behind its leader, united before the world. Whatever of disaffection may exist in the Democratic party, whatever of partisan feeling among Republicans, whatever of discontent among Progressives, must be brushed aside for the time if the greatest glory is to be won for the nation and for democracy in achieving the goal of all mankind—the disarmament of the world." Similar appeals, based on the same necessity of upholding the President at a moment not merely of international crisis, but of worldwide convulsion, flowed out from other and equally authoritative sources. I do not pretend that domestic issues were entirely lost sight of. But they were certainly relegated to a secondary place. The argument always culminated in a reference to the war and its problems as the vital consideration that should induce his countrymen to tender President Wilson a vote of national confidence.

But what was the result? Even amid the engrossments of a struggle for national existence Englishmen found time enough for a gasp of amazement when the American election returns came in. For they indicated, or seemed to indicate, that the American people did not, after all, regard the war in Europe as a reason why they should close their ranks, or forego a single jot of their wonted partisanship, or allow their minds to be distracted even for a moment from the excitements of domestic politics. They voted apparently just as they would have voted had the world been wrapped in the profoundest peace. The old spirit of parochialism neither abated nor surrendered anything. They administered to Mr. Wilson the time-honored rebuff which every President must by now have learned to expect at these mid-term elections. They cut down the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives from over one hundred and forty to less than twenty-five. They made mincemeat of the Progressives with a sort of holy and exclusive joy. They

swung over to the Republicans as unconcernedly as they had swung away from them in 1910 and 1912. All the familiar factors played, so far as one could judge, their accustomed and unhampered rôles. Times were hard and the voters, as usual, visited their dissatisfaction upon the party in power. Large manufacturing and agricultural interests had been hit by the reduction of the tariff and sought an immediate revenge. Big business, as it well might be, was antagonized and perturbed by the Democratic policy against the trusts, and took the quickest means of letting its feelings be known. The positive achievements of the Administration went, it would seem, for little or nothing. The popular admiration for the President's character and the popular trust in his methods and judgment proved equally ineffective to stop the reaction. As for the war, it is questionable whether it influenced a single vote. The old slogans, the old local attachments and rivalries, the old particularistic considerations, carried all before them. "Uncle Joe" re-emerged in Illinois without the slightest reference to his views on German policy, which are probably, in any event, unprintable. Senator Penrose was re-elected in Pennsylvania and nobody dreamed of inquiring into his attitude on the disarmament of the world and the steps that the United States should take to promote it. "In the crisis of Europe," wrote Sydney Smith, of one of the distracted ministers who succeeded Pitt, "he safely brought the Curates' Salaries Improvement Bill to a second reading." For the crisis of civilization the American people solemnly fitted a new handle to the parish pump.

It was at once a disconcerting performance and a magnificent one. Magnificent, I mean, because this spectacle of the United States going about its homely, trivial affairs while all the rest of the world was tearing itself to pieces, demonstrated both the happy fate which has exempted the American Republic from the fierce contentions of Europe and the sublime confidence of its citizens that nothing will really disturb their serene aloofness. But at the same time it was disconcerting because one could not well forbear to wonder how far this confidence was the product of ignorance and inexperience and how far the outcome of a calm and comprehensive study of the situation and its possibilities. It was disconcerting, too, because it seemed so little to harmonize either with the material damage that the war has already entailed upon the American people or with their grandiose conceptions of the part reserved for them in helping on its conclusion and preventing its recurrence. What Europe noted as the result

of the November elections was that, when it came to the test, the voters of the United States could sweep the greatest of all wars to one side as a matter of no effective concern to them and could find a seemingly complete oblivion in local politics. At a time when every other nation was pondering how best to strengthen its Government, the American people deliberately weakened theirs. At a time when all the rest of the world was standing on guard, concerting measures of national defense and simplifying all internal issues, the United States visited upon its President a humiliation which undoubtedly had a political, if not a personal, significance and which for the remainder of his term of office must fetter his power of achievement and make him feel that he is to some extent a President on sufferance. The only inference that foreign onlookers could draw from such a proceeding was that, for all their abstract interest in the war and their desire to assist at its settlement and their apprehensions that its outcome might in some ways prejudice American policies or fortunes, the American people did not at bottom regard it as an American event or of sufficient importance to affect the normal course of their domestic politics. On any other hypothesis the result of the November elections, surprising in any case, became from the international standpoint inexplicable.

The contrast thus displayed between American speech and aspirations, on the one hand, and American action, on the other, is a contrast that frequently reappears in American dealings with external affairs. Can it be said that, apart from the Monroe Doctrine, the scope of which no two Americans seem able to agree upon, the United States has really any foreign policy at all? I was very greatly struck by one of President Wilson's first acts on stepping into the White House. When Mr. Knox was the American Secretary of State, the United States Government in the Far East, as in South America, appeared to have adopted the German plan of pushing private trade by every artifice of official and diplomatic assistance. Mr. Taft's indorsement of this policy was repeatedly proclaimed, and his insistence upon American participation in the Hankau-Szechuen loan proved that he meant what he said and was determined to act upon it. Had he remained in office there can be little doubt that the United States would have more than maintained her initial share and interest in what was known as the Six-Power loan. President Wilson had not been in power for more than a few weeks when he ordered the withdrawal of his Government from the whole

transaction. He defended his action on grounds that involved a flat condemnation and reversal of the spirit and aims which animated his predecessor and the total abandonment at a moment's notice of what had seemed to be a definite policy. But what chiefly impressed me was that this great and possibly momentous change in the American attitude was made by the President "off his own bat," and not as the result of any agitation or discussion one way or the other in Congress or the press. The American people as a whole had never been in the least interested in President Taft's and Mr. Knox's diplomatic activities in the Far East, and they were just as little moved when Mr. Wilson called an abrupt halt and started off in the opposite direction. Little incidents like that in remote and "inferior" countries do not, it appears, touch the national consciousness. Not one Congressman in a hundred, or one of his constituents in fifty thousand, knows or cares anything about them; and the man in the cars hears that America is doing something in China, or refraining from doing something, with equal indifference.

The broad moral to be extracted from the complete passivity with which his countrymen received Mr. Wilson's departure from what had all the appearance of being the established lines of American policy in the Far East has been confirmed by the failure last November of the American electorate to close round the President in the face of the European convulsion. The moral roughly is that the average American still holds to the belief that the United States has one set of interests and the rest of the world another. The general sentiment of the country, so far as I have been able to gauge it, still regards the wars and diplomatic disputes of the Old World, even such a war as the present, with a mainly spectacular concern; still desires to have as few dealings as possible with foreign Powers, and still shrinks from any course that might conceivably lead to an "entangling alliance." American foreign policy, therefore, so far as it is concerned with the affairs of Europe and Asia, proceeds without any reasoned and consistent backing of popular knowledge or interest, and very largely, in consequence, turns on the personality and opinions of particular Presidents or particular Secretaries of State. It is altogether natural that this should be so. The United States is remote, unconquerable, huge, without hostile neighbors or any neighbors at all of anything like her own strength, and lives exempt in an almost untroubled tranquillity from the contentions and animosities and the ceaseless pressure and

counter-pressure that distract the close-packed older world. Inevitably, therefore, a sober, sustained, and well-informed interest in foreign affairs is a luxury with which the ordinary American citizen feels he can dispense. He sees at present no necessity for it; circumstances have never compelled him to look upon it as an essential part of his political equipment.

That is what makes it extremely difficult to forecast with any definiteness the course of American action in regard to the present war. One must always allow for the traditional sentiment in favor of isolation and non-interference, for the hiatus disclosed in the November elections between the opinions and ambitions expressed in the American journals and the actions of the American voters at the polls, for the rarity in the United States of first-hand acquaintance with the complexities of European affairs, and also for the comparatively lowly position occupied by the American army and navy. Everything points to the possibility that a time may come when the United States, after carefully sounding all the belligerents, may usefully proffer its services as a mediator. But it is certain that no proposals looking toward peace and emanating from Washington will be entertained merely to flatter American esteem or before each of the combatants is ready to sheathe the sword; and it is quite on the cards that negotiations may be initiated without employing any outside agency at all and that the map of Europe may be drastically redrawn without America being called into consultation at all. One thing at least is very sure, and that is that whatever hopes Americans cherish of influencing the final settlement will be jeopardized by a single false or premature move in the direction of peace. A formal and decorative but none the less honorable and helpful rôle may be reserved for American diplomacy later on, but to assume it at the right moment and with the requisite efficiency, and to save themselves also from fruitless efforts and avoidable disappointments, Americans, I imagine, will do well to exercise a vast amount of patience and to avoid all hasty overtures that are prompted merely by a desire for peace and that ignore the vital elements of the problem to be solved.

As for the larger visions which seem to be floating before many American eyes, and particularly the vision of universal disarmament tempered by a League of Peace, I confess to a certain skepticism as to the possibility of realizing them, the more so as in many influential quarters in the United States the war in Europe is pointed to as a reason not for decreasing, but

for increasing and reorganizing, the American army and navy. In any event, there will be such an infinity of work to be done in getting European life and government restored on their new lines that ultimate issues will inevitably have to wait their turn. A reduction of armaments on a fixed scale and by means of an international agreement is, on the other hand, a feasible undertaking which American influence and example may conceivably do much to forward. But beyond that the danger of attempting too much becomes both near and real, and a warning against extravagant and unrealizable expectations is even now not untimely. It is a warning that may be applied to other spheres. Americans clearly anticipate a prodigious increase in their foreign trade through the inability of the exhausted nations of Europe to hold their position in neutral markets. But it is doubtful how far these very natural and legitimate hopes can be fulfilled. They certainly cannot be fulfilled unless Americans emulate the Germans and the British in their knowledge of foreign tongues, their readiness to give long credits and to trade on small margins of profit, their attention to the whims and peculiarities of distant and exacting customers, and unless they develop once more a well-organized American mercantile marine. The well-worn and customary channels of foreign commerce, to which hitherto Americans have paid but small attention, cannot be altered in a day; and it is already clear that the tremendous advantages accruing to Great Britain from the unique position of London are going to be tenaciously held.

Many awkward difficulties are likely to arise before this war is ended over questions of contraband. But as they will chiefly concern the United States and Great Britain, as both countries are well disposed toward each other, and as there is, I believe, as little desire among Americans to hamper British arms as there is among Englishmen to interfere unduly with American trade, these questions ought to be disposed of one by one without disturbing Anglo-American relations. Nobody in Great Britain expected from the United States any other position than that of a strict neutrality; nobody has any criticisms to pass upon it; nobody believes there will be any trouble about maintaining it. It is true that the exceptionally rigid construction which President Wilson places upon the obligations of neutrality has occasioned some surprise in Great Britain just as it has in the United States. But it is recognized that in everything he has thus far done—in his appeal for a neutrality not merely of action, but of comment and opinion, in his embargo on the raising of

American loans for the belligerents, in his hesitancy to protest against the violation of The Hague conventions, in his gravely dispassionate replies to the Belgian mission and the Kaiser's representations, and in his permitting the vetoing by his Secretary of the Navy of "Tipperary" as a proper song for American soldiers and sailors—the President has been actuated by but one motive, to convince all the combatants of the completeness of his impartiality that he may the better serve the cause of peace hereafter. That is a motive with which no Englishman has or can have any quarrel.

I need hardly add that Great Britain has been heartened in this war by the belief that the great majority of the American people are in sympathy with the cause of the Allies and realize how necessary it is that that cause should triumph if democracy is to be preserved and if militarism and force, as the supreme arbiters of human affairs, are to be restricted. It would be only in the event of a German triumph that American neutrality would be really endangered and that the menace which Prussia has long aimed at Europe would stretch across the Atlantic. That is a development which the Allies are taking the best possible means to avert.

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